THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
CENTER FOR NORTHEAST ASIAN POLICY STUDIES

OBSERVATIONS ON THE U.S. – ROK ALLIANCE

Analysis provided by

DR. RICHARD BUSH
SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR
CENTER FOR NORTHEAST ASIAN POLICY STUDIES (CNAPS)
THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

KORUS House
Opening Ceremony
Washington, DC
May 5, 2006

I am very pleased to speak on the occasion of the dedication of KORUS House as a center for cooperation in media, academics and society concerning critical current issues. I've already attended a number of programs here. I expect to attend many more.
I am also very honored to follow Minister Kim Chan-ho, Minister of the Korea's Information Agency, at the podium.

As great an honor as it is to speak on this occasion, I also feel quite inadequate because I am not a Korea specialist. I know just enough about the Korean peninsula to get myself in trouble. But I still feel touched that Minister Yoon would invite me to offer some thoughts on this occasion concerning the relationship between the United States and the Republic of Korea, and where it might be going.

I wish to begin by offering a historical perspective on current events. Last week President Roh Moo-hyun, in his remarks about the Dokdo dispute, said it was after the Russo-Japanese war that traditional Korea lost its independence. What he meant, I guess, was that in November 1905 a Japanese "protectorate" was established over Korea. That event took place a century ago, plus a few months. Now the loss of national independence is not something that any Korean wishes to dwell on, for understandable reasons. On the other hand, a century is a fairly short time in human history. When you think about it, what the Korean people have accomplished over the last hundred years is quite remarkable. What the Republic of Korea has accomplished over the last sixty years is also quite remarkable.

- The Korean nation endured four decades of harsh colonial rule.
- The people of the South withstood a tragic invasion from the north in 1950 and then the threat of renewed attack for several decades thereafter.
- The people of the South, through diligence and self-sacrifice, created an economic miracle that is the envy of many developing countries.
- After almost forty years of authoritarian government, the people of the South made the transition to a democratic system, which again is the envy of other countries.
- The Republic of Korea is a respected and valued member of the international community.

If you had predicted any of these developments when talking to Western experts after World War I, or even after World War II, they probably would have laughed in your face.

Now, as you all know better than I, there are some tasks that remain for Korea.

First and foremost, Korea needs to end the sad state of national division. I am certain that unification will occur, and that it will occur under the aegis of the ROK. I hope it will occur in my lifetime, if only for the sake of the long-suffering people of the North.

Second, I believe that South Korea needs to consolidate its democracy and improve its corporate governance.

Third, probably after unification, the modern Korean nation will have to complete the process of forging a modern identity. As Professor David Kang of Dartmouth University has noted, Koreans have for decades defined themselves by what they are not. Sooner or later they will have to define themselves by what they are.

These tasks are easy for me to say but not so easy to do. But I am confident that the people of the Republic of Korea, having met a number of other daunting challenges, will have the capacity to meet this one as well.

Returning to my previous theme, one of the reasons that Republic of Korea was so successful in the second half of the twentieth century—why it was able to survive and thrive – was its relationship with the United States. I know that some South Koreans would disagree with this judgment, but on balance I think it is true. The question for the future is what role the relationship with the United States, and the U.S. alliance will play as Korea adjusts to the new realities in East Asia.

Earlier this week, the Brookings Institution and the Sejong Institute held a conference on the U.S.-ROK alliance. We called the event the Seoul-Washington Forum. The conference served as the launching for a new dialogue channel that our two organizations have created to foster candid interchange among Koreans and Americans about our bilateral relationship. We will consider how we should face North Korea, and how we address changes in Northeast Asia such as the rise of China. The fact is, our two countries are rather divided when it comes to policy on some of these questions. The Republic of Korea has its conservatives and its progressives. America has its conservatives and its liberals (one can call them progressives).

Indeed, it would be surprising if there were no divisions, both within our two countries and between them. Our task is to find a way to reduce those differences and ensure that they do not devalue what we have in common. I believe that the first step in reducing differences is to expose them and to talk about them frankly.

What was striking in the discussions concerning our relationship is how much remains contested. Sometimes it is the facts themselves. For example, was the United States involved at all in the suppression at Kwangju in May 1980 or could it have done anything to prevent it? Another example, how close to war were the United States and North Korea in June 1994?

In other cases, the issue is one of relevance and interpretation. The Taft-Katsura agreement is a fact, and the United States thereby made a decision concerning the Korean people without their involvement or consultation. The Taft-Katsura agreement is known to every Korean school child. By contrast, it is known to a very, very small number of Americans. The question remaining is, how much should it affect our bilateral relations a century later? These debates over the facts, over interpretations, and over contemporary relevance go on within the United States, within the Republic of Korea, and between our two countries.

Indeed, in his presentation at this week's conference, Dr. Michael Green, who up until December worked in the Bush White House, drew the conclusion that many of the major sources of tensions in the U.S.-ROK alliance do not concern material security threats or interests. Rather, they are over things like myths, national pride, and so on. Now Dr. Green would not underestimate the importance of such issues, and nor would I. These factors can be powerfully important in international relations. They must be managed well. But Dr. Green expressed the fear that strategists in the United States read too much into Korean concerns about identity and history and overreact. I certainly hope that is not the case.

As a recently departed official, Dr. Green was inclined to emphasize the progress that has been made in U.S.-ROK relations over the last few years in spite of the fact that there is a conservative president in the White House and a progressive president in the Blue House. He cited the following achievements:

- The agreement to launch FTA negotiations, a major step forward in our trade liberalization efforts;
- The decision to relocate U.S. forces on the peninsula so that less of a burden on the South Korean population;
- The deployment of 3,000 ROK forces to Iraq;
- The inclusion of the Republic of Korea in multilateral diplomacy on North Korea's nuclear program;
- The September 19 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks;
- The Bush-Roh Joint statement at the Kyongju Summit in November 2005; and so on.

None of these achievements occurred without hard work and a certain amount of friction. They are not in any way insignificant. But the Brookings-Sejong conference also highlighted a number of significant substantive issues on which there is disagreement both within the United States and Korea and between us.

In particular, our conference highlighted three issues that will dominate the agenda of the end of the Roh Moo-hyun and George W. Bush Administrations. There should be no surprise for this audience what the issues are. They are: the six-party talks, the FTA negotiations, and the discussions on a roadmap for transferring wartime operational control of South Korean forces to a ROK commander.

This is not an appropriate occasion to go into the details of these issues. In each case, we are at the beginning of the process and in some sense are working against deadlines. On FTA in particular, there is the hard deadline of the expiration of trade promotion authority in thirteen months.

On each of these matters, our governments have significant, well-founded differences. With regards to North Korea, The Republic of Korea believes more in incentives; the United States is giving more emphasis to applying pressure. On the military issue,

American operational control is linked to a number of other matters. If you change OPCON, it forces consideration of changes in all the others.

In all of these issues, domestic politics are at play. I expect Washington is not ready for South Korean demonstrators expressing their views concerning American demands in the FTA negotiations, but that is what we are likely to have.

Each of these issues is complicated by itself. We are trying to do all three at once. It is quite possible that as a result, the issues may get entangled in unpredictable ways, making their resolution even more complicated.

Yet the stakes are very high in all of these parallel negotiations. I would argue that our alliance will be much stronger if we are successful in the six-party talks, the FTA negotiations, and wartime operational control. If, on the other hand, we fail to resolve some of these issues or all of them, it will weaken the basis of our alliance for the future. So I hope we succeed.

As these specific cases make clear, the fact that the United States and the Republic of Korea are both democracies ironically makes addressing the challenges of our alliance more difficult. If finding answers were left up to a small number of officials in each country, as it was in the past, the process of adjustment to new realities would be much easier. Our presidents and senior officials would simply meet at the White House or the Blue House and work it out. But they no longer have that freedom. The people of the two countries, and particularly the people of the Republic of Korea, demand a seat at the negotiating table.

I tend believe that U.S. policy circles were slow to recognize the implications of the democratization of the Republic of Korea. We were rather complacent and assumed after the end of the Cold War that the alliance would continue as before with the United States in the senior position. We should have realized a long time before we did that the fall of the Soviet Union, the atrophy of North Korean power, and generational change in the Republic of Korea would all alter the value of the alliance in the eyes of the South Korean people. That was to be expected.

We know of examples where the dynamics of democracy have undermined alliance relationships. One vivid example that I witnessed first hand about fifteen years ago when I was working on Capitol Hill was the effort to retain the American bases in the Philippines. In the end, popular Filipino resentment over America's historical role in their country and, frankly, politicians' willingness to manipulate that resentment was too strong to reach a timely and mutually acceptable deal. As a result, the US-Philippines alliance is a shell of what it could have been.

Because the broad mainstream in United States believes that the alliance is in the interest of South Korea, we needs to do a better job of explaining to South Korean people why that is the case. Our diplomats need to engage at all levels of Korean society and across the political spectrum.

The same is true in this country. Americans need to hear South Korean views on the alliance, on how it should evolve to adjust to changing geopolitical circumstances and changing ROK interests.

That is why the efforts of the embassy to inform the American people are so important. As our two government's face these three big issues over the next two years, American opinion leaders, American scholars, and American politicians need to hear from the Republic of Korea about win-win solutions and why they will benefit our two nations and strengthen our alliance. That is why the opening of KORUS House has come not a moment to soon.